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# THE OLYMPIC GAMES AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE PUBLIC REALM

## MEXICO CITY 1968 AND RIO DE JANEIRO 2016

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For Brazil, which is currently the world's eighth largest economy and is tipped to become the fifth, the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2016 represent a unique opportunity. **Fernanda Canales** looks at Rio de Janeiro 2016 in light of Mexico City 1968, and considers how the Games should provide an occasion for both urban regeneration and also recasting the city's often previously conflicting image for an international audience.

It is almost a cliché to say that the Olympic Games have been a strategic tool for the deployment of urban agendas. However, prior to the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, with the possible exception of Berlin 1936, no other city had embarked on such an ambitious urban revitalisation project that combined infrastructure, culture and communication as a way to reimagine a city. This moment may well represent a turning point between the idea of architectural and cultural modernity and another based on political and social renewal.

In the case of Latin America – Mexico in 1968 and Brazil in 2016 – the Olympic Games not only explain much of the urban and social agenda of these countries, but also account for the idea of modernity itself. In both cases, with an interval of almost 50 years, the main aim has been that of presenting an image of a unified, homogeneous and planned territory. Instead of understanding the Olympic Games merely as an excuse to upgrade transportation systems, improve housing and infrastructure, they have increasingly become a great anti-crime policy, a health policy, a social equaliser: an assertion of modernity and cohesion.

The Olympic Games in Mexico City offered a renewal strategy based primarily on representation. They were the first Olympic Games in the world to be televised in colour and to be 'aired' live via satellite communications, attesting to the profound relevance given to their representation as image.<sup>1</sup> The social crisis characterised by the student rebellions of 1968, came to a head with the Tlatelolco massacre in which hundreds were killed by military forces scarcely 10 days before inauguration. The Games were thus constructed by decisions based on *what* to show and *how* to show it. The exaltation of structures of power, exemplified by the relevance given to the formal power of institutional architecture, set the tone for a city that wanted to be seen from the outside, and was therefore made to be perceived in motion, primarily through television, by car or by plane.

#### Rio de Janeiro, 2016

*opposite:* The new projects, Barra Media Village (by BCMF Arquitetos) and Barra Cluster (by BCMF Arquitetos and LUMO Arquitectura) for Barra de Tijuca, a nouveau-riche neighbourhood at the wealthiest end of the city, where more than half of the new facilities will be located.

#### Mexico City, 1968

*below:* Housing and sports facilities built alongside Anillo Periférico on the outskirts of the city, where the idea of a new and modern territory was implemented.





### Mexico City, 1968

*below:* Project by Mathias Goeritz in which a 17-kilometre/10.5-mile (vehicular) route of sculptures made by artists from diverse countries connected the different dispersed Olympic sites, tracing the path and expansion of the Anillo Periférico (peripheral ring) in an interesting mixture of culture, art and infrastructure. Anillo Periférico was in itself a model of urban modernity, as had been the case of Torres de Satélite built by Goeritz and Luis Barragán a decade earlier.



*bottom:* The construction of the modern city was based on the idea of mobility and the use of cars.

### Barcelona, 1992

*opposite:* Villa Olímpica, a legacy of the Olympics of 1992 which regenerated the city, and especially its relationship with the waterfront.



The Olympics in Mexico were a spectacular communication and design programme, but above all they were the vehicle to present a facade of unity and modernity.





The Olympics in Mexico were a spectacular communication and design programme, but above all they were the vehicle to present a facade of unity and modernity. This emphasis on coordination, or 'Olympic identity', was highlighted by the beginning of the construction of the subway system as a new way of organising the city. Unlike the graphics – which would become a landmark – and the artistic contributions – with the creation of the Cultural Olympics planned to last the entire year – the first Olympic Games in Latin America produced little architecture worth noting. They were particularly characterised by specific interventions scattered around a growing urban footprint. The choice of locations was based on the availability of government-owned property and on adaptations on existing buildings, accentuating the pressing need for a coherent and strong image. The entire city, already brimming over, was imagined as the Olympic stage, unlike past Olympic Games where most construction lay within Olympic villages.<sup>2</sup>

As social contrasts and the demand for national democratisation increased after the student riots, architecture, as well as public space, gradually became more monumental and representative and less a place for interacting. Public congregations began to represent a threat to government authorities, which favoured not the use of open architecture characterised by plazas and patios, but a new city thought out for the use of cars. While the population doubled (from 3

million to 6 million), the urban area increased by more than 100 per cent, from 200 to 320 square kilometres (77.2 to 123.5 square miles), and the number of cars tripled, from 130,000 to 450,000 in a fast-growing area where 60 per cent of the settlements were created illegally.

While in Mexico, after the confrontation in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, public space took on negative connotations for the political order, in other examples, Barcelona being the most paradigmatic, the creation of a modern metropolis was based on the idea of a city focused on open spaces. Operation Barcelona '92 consisted of transforming old factories, opening the city towards the sea and giving the outskirts a monumental nature, but above all it was based on the transformation of a city by defining its public space, conceived as a system for guaranteeing citizenship and freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the Olympic Games in Mexico City signified the end of a period marked by the figure of the architect as a planner or strategist<sup>4</sup> – from Mario Pani to Ramírez Vázquez<sup>5</sup> – the Olympics in Barcelona in 1992, on the other hand, marked the beginning of the city of architects. As a result of the successful 'Barcelona model', architectural euphoria has nurtured many of the Olympic strategies since then (from Beijing to London).<sup>6</sup> However, for London 2012, the sustainable legacy angle is stronger. Bringing the East End closer to the centre, replacing polluted areas with green spaces and thinking long term – 30 years

instead of the just weeks that the Olympic Games usually last – are the main ingredients of the upcoming Games, planned for all spectators to arrive by public transport, on foot or by bicycle, and for infrastructure to be downsized, sold and reused.

In a manner similar to that of London's green agenda and that of Beijing's ostentation of modern China on the global stage, Brazil plans to use the Olympics as a way of showing off the country's transformation. The Rio de Janeiro Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2016<sup>7</sup> are based to a great extent on fostering the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) economies. They are planned to take place in metropolitan Rio, mainly in Barra de Tijuca where more than half of the Olympic facilities will be located, but also in the districts of Maracanã, Copacabana and Deodoro. This choice is intended to focus the Olympic investments on the regions where the greatest amount of development is currently aimed, although a prevailing rhetoric promises to distribute the Games' benefits among the general population.<sup>8</sup>

Rio de Janeiro, boasting on one hand its condition as one of the five most urbanised cities of Southern America<sup>9</sup> and, on the other hand, its 90 kilometres (55.9 miles) of beaches and image of virginal paradise, has always been a city conflicting between two main ideals: that of development understood in terms of building and growth and that of conserving nature. The dichotomies between its exuberant nature and an urban landscape sprawling across its territory have defined its



Rio de Janeiro, 2016  
below: Aerial View of Rio de Janeiro,  
October 2010.

opposite: Street view of Rio de Janeiro,  
February 2010; Nature and informality  
clustered in different pockets across  
Rio form a strong visual contrast to the  
planned city.







split identity. With the Olympics, Rio regains the capital condition that had been stolen by Brasília in 1960 and searches for the possibility of reimagining the coexistence of informal growth with planning, as well as reconciling nature with urban development in a territory where dichotomies are accentuated due to an extreme topography which challenges the idea of a planned and socially homogeneous city.

President Lula da Silva has asserted that the word 'favela' – used to describe the shantytowns where more than one million people live in Rio<sup>10</sup> (a third of the population in 2001) – will disappear in time for the Games,<sup>11</sup> and he has also announced an ecological seal backed by the idea of a green city. Hence, the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio have become a political and social discourse: an attempt to 'civilise' the city. The favelas praised by Le Corbusier during his travels in the 1930s and considered by Richard Neutra as 'the hopeful reserve of the community',<sup>12</sup> now become a symbol of the desire and promise to rewrite the social and urban history of Rio.

The Games are part of a broader political and touristic campaign intended to sell the idea that landscapes of inequality and uneven development can be transformed into efficient, safe and socially homogeneous territories. Intense worries and complaints have already arisen due to ecological legislations that obstruct the interests of real-estate speculation. The credibility of pacifying favelas is also at stake – with almost half of the 1,000 slums of the city dominated by violence<sup>13</sup> – but Brazil, being the world's eighth-largest economy and heading to become the fifth,<sup>14</sup> overtaking the UK and

France, has to integrate the squalid districts within the city, transforming *favelados* into citizens in a project for the city that attempts to build in seven years more infrastructure than in the past 50 years.

The Olympics as a strategy of representation reveals the forces at work behind the urban agendas of cities. Whether large-scale interventions based on dormant, former industrial territories as London's East End project, or whether through acupuncture interventions inside problematic and fast-growing cities, as in the case of Mexico and Rio, representation and image are sometimes far more important than the final results. In Latin America, where development is seen always through a short-term perspective, staging the Olympics has become a persuasive media event designed to hide social instabilities, to display a competitive fitness on a global scale and above all to work under a national agenda.

The nearly half a century separating the Mexico City Olympic Games and those of Rio de Janeiro shows that, despite the fact that the Games are an excuse for driving urban transformation, they reinforce the idea that, in the end, all urban planning projects are also a way of doing politics, and it is within this concept that a way of understanding the public realm is constructed. ▢

#### Notes

1. The country's political and social instability, teetering on actual breakdown, was translated into a strong message of national unity – a message that pervaded almost every aspect of creative expression in a sports event that was as much a political and urban one.
2. The urgency due to the inauguration date and financial limitations was a defining factor in the project, led by the architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. Mexico 1968 signalled the end of far-reaching modernisation strategies as well as the end of architecture understood

as a national project, replaced by isolated actions on a smaller scale in which the public realm has been progressively controlled and fenced in.

3. With architect Oriol Bohigas as the main driving force behind the definition of a new contemporary culture through the formalisation of public space and as the person responsible for post-Franco urban planning in Barcelona, public funds were used to design the empty spaces, the voids in the city. After decades of prohibition of the Catalan language and an active discouragement of the congregation of large crowds, the city began by reinventing itself in a social arena, particularly based on public space.

4. The Olympic Games represent the last major project for the city. The all-encompassing enthusiasm that had made possible projects like Ciudad Universitaria in the 1950s proved unattainable over the following decades.

5. In Mexico, with the modern agenda on the verge of being torn apart after 1968, the representative purpose of construction became increasingly relevant, creating architecture that was as autonomous and authoritarian as the regime to which it owed its existence.

6. In time, however, Barcelona gradually moved towards an atmosphere that glorified architecture and restricted the public realm in favour of private initiatives, with the Diagonal Mar project in 2004 built as the new paradigm of regenerating the city, which received mixed reviews.

7. It is the first time that a South American city is to host the greatest event in world sport and will also site the World Cup two years earlier.

8. The prospectus talks of redeveloping the decaying port area, and cleansing the polluted Guanabara Bay, but whereas Barcelona built its Olympic village in a derelict part of its port, in Rio it will be sited in Barra da Tijuca, a neighbourhood at the wealthiest end of the city. See 'Rio's Expensive New Rings', *The Economist*, 8 October 2009.

9. 'Urban Age' conference, São Paulo, December 2008.

10. Juan Arias, 'Rio de Janeiro', *El País*, 1 December 2010.

11. Juan Arias, 'Un nuevo Río para 2016', *El País*, 5 October 2009.

12. Richard Neutra, *Architecture as Social Concern in Regions of Mild Climate*, Gerth Todtmann (Chicago), 1948, p. 190.

13. Juan Arias, 'Rio de Janeiro', op cit. See also 'Rio de Janeiro, a Magic Moment for the City of Good', *The Economist*, 10 June 2010.

14. 'Brazil Takes Off', *The Economist*, 12 November 2009.

# LATIN AMERICA AT THE CROSSROADS

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Topics include:

**Large-scale urban**  
**case studies, such**  
**as the revitalisation**  
**of Bogotá**  
**and Medellín**

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The announcement of Rio de Janeiro as the 2016 Olympic host city has placed Latin America on the world's stage. Now, for the first time since the mid-20th century when Modernist ideas were undertaken on an epic scale, Latin America is the centre of international attention and architectural pilgrimage. The mass migrations from the countryside and the erection of informal settlements in the late 20th century left cities socially and spatially divided. As a response, in recent decades resourceful governments and practices have developed innovative approaches that are less to do with utopian and totalitarian schemes and more to do with urban acupuncture, working within, rather than opposing, informality to stitch together disparate parts of the city. Once a blind spot in cities' representation, informality is now considered an asset to be understood and incorporated. As a result of globalisation, Latin America is now once again set to go through major change. The solutions presented in this issue represent the vanguard in mitigating strong social and spatial divisions in cities across the world.